

Arms Nobody Wants To Control

by Alastair Buchan

The fear of nuclear proliferation has now become one of the prime forces shaping American and British foreign policy, though there is as yet no clear agreement on how it should be confronted. In the attempt to isolate and study this problem, relatively little attention has been paid to proliferation of non-nuclear weapons. Yet in at least two big confrontations, between India and Pakistan, and between Israel and her Arab neighbors, this has directly influenced consideration of national nuclear weapons. It is ironical that the industrial powers of the northern hemisphere, Western and Communist, have in the past decade spent tens of billions of dollars in the attempt to stabilize the balance of power among themselves, but elsewhere have pursued policies leading to local arms races which by committing them increasingly to their client states have risked the destabilization of their own precarious relationship.

It is important not to inflate this proposition. Neither the United States nor the Soviet Union, Britain and France or Czechoslovakia can be held directly responsible for the fact that any rebel leader in the third world war can lay his hands on enough small arms to start a guerrilla war. This is partly the result of the vast dumps of military equipment that were left scattered all over the world twenty years ago, or disbursed, like those in the enormous Suez base, in the process of decolonization. It also derives partly from the fact that they can be manufactured so easily, as the Viet Cong, fashioning water pipes into mortars, have shown. The laxity of some countries – notably the United States – about personal weapons has not helped. But the private trade in arms, the grubby activities of the men in Alexandria and Monaco, Milan and Hamburg, who can supply a plane load of rifles or a couple of old aircraft to a rebel leader, are not a serious threat to international peace. It is the sober policy of sober governments which is the root of the trouble.

The pattern of military aid and trade over the last ten years since the Soviet Union entered the picture is an exceedingly complex one, and is difficult to plot with any accuracy since most governments conceal essential information in their figures. But one can identify two pressures which seem to have operated with roughly equal force on Western and Warsaw Pact countries.

The first is the enormous thirst for major armaments in the third world. It is a by-product of decolonization itself, the emergence of over 50 new states, to whom arms, fighter aircraft, frigates, tanks bearing their own national emblems are as much a sign of sovereign independence as they are to the historic nation states. It is not at all surprising that the industrial powers, locked in an ideological struggle of their own, should have seen this eagerness for arms as a source of influence in the areas outside the direct East-West conflict. The supply of even relatively simple weapons necessitates a training mission and ties the country umbilically to the supply of spare parts. The military establishment is bound to play a part in the politics of a new country and is thus an important source of influence. There is an implicit competition for its favors. The British for years sought this sort of relationship with the Middle Eastern states as well as with the new Commonwealth countries. The French have tried, unsuccessfully, to maintain a monopoly of military aid to former French Africa. The Soviet Union has scattered its favors on a purely opportunist basis to Egypt and Indonesia on a grand scale, to Cuba, Iraq, Syria, Algeria, Morocco, Somalia and Afghanistan, as well as providing MIGS for India. Most of the \$21 billion spent in American military aid over the past ten years has, of course, gone to her allies in the Far East and Europe but, under the notion of "free world orientation" it has also been scattered among a wide range of smaller countries.

The second pressure for military aid and trade derives from the hectic pace of the central arms race, which clutters the inventories and depots of the industrial powers with hardware which is obsolescent for their needs but is still quite serviceable. They have gone through three generations of fighter aircraft and tanks in the last 20 years, two of anti-aircraft missiles and one of almost every type of ship. Treasury officials in Moscow as well as in Washington view with less gloom the scrapping of equipment which has cost so much to develop if it can be written off the books by aid or trade to another country, even at a modest value. Ever since the 19th Century the major powers have steadily off-loaded obsolescent ships on to the minor ones (an acquaintance of mine who was due for retirement after serving as naval attaché in a Latin American country was offered retention and promotion if he could sell a cruiser to its government). However, the United States

MR. BUCHAN is director of the Institute for Strategic Studies in London.